

Christopher Marlowe's The Passionate Shepherd to His Love (Summary and Analysis of)

Summary

"The Passionate [Shepherd](#) to His Love" is a pastoral lyric, a poetic form that is used to create an idealized vision of rural life within the context of personal emotion. Pastoral poems had been in vogue among poets for at least seventeen hundred years when Marlowe wrote this one. The Greek poet Theocritus, in the third century B.C.E. (Shipley 300-1,) was the first pastoralist poet, and he, too, wrote about shepherds. All pastoral poetry, including Marlowe's, is to some degree influenced by this original practitioner.

The poem is written in very regular iambic tetrameter. Each line contains exactly four heavy stresses, and the metrical feet are almost always iambic. Similarly, most lines contain eight syllables, and the few that don't create a specific poetic effect (such as lines 3 and 4), or have easily elided syllables which may be read as eight. This regular meter, sustained through the twenty-four lines, remarkably never descends into the sing-song quality so prevalent in tetrameter, primarily because Marlowe salts his lines with a variety of devices that complement the meter without drawing too much attention to its rigid regularity. Marlowe's use of soft consonants (such as W, M, Em, F) to start lines, with the

occasional "feminine" ending of an unstressed syllable (in the third stanza) lend a delightful variety to an essentially regular and completely conventional form.

In the first stanza, the Shepherd invites his love to come with him and "pleasures prove" (line 2.) This immediate reference to pleasure gives a mildly sexual tone to this poem, but it is of the totally innocent, almost naïve kind. The Shepherd makes no innuendo of a sordid type, but rather gently and directly calls to his love. He implies that the entire geography of the countryside of England "Valleys, groves, hills and fields/Woods or steeply mountains" will prove to contain pleasure of all kinds for the lovers. This vision of the bounteous earth is a very common theme in pastoral poetry. The idealization of rural life is essentially what separates pastoral poetry from simple rustic verse. Realism, which would not come into being as a poetic or literary style for many centuries after Marlowe, has little place in pastoral verse.

The next stanza suggests that the lovers will take their entertainment not in a theatre or at a banquet, but sitting upon rocks or by rivers. They will watch shepherds feeding their flocks, or listening to waterfalls and the songs of birds. The enticements of such auditory and visual pleasures can be seen as a marked contrast to the "hurly-burly" of the London stage plays which

Marlowe would write. These are entirely bucolic, traditional entertainments; the idea of Marlowe, the young man about town who chose to live in London, actually enjoying these rustic pleasures exclusively and leaving the city behind is laughable. Again, these invitations are not to be taken literally. Marlowe may well have admired pastoral verse, and the ideals of it were not necessarily those he would espouse for himself.

The third, fourth, and fifth stanzas are a kind of list of the "delights", mostly sartorial, that the Shepherd will make for his lady love. Here it becomes clearer that the "Shepherd" is really none of the same; indeed, he is more like a feudal landowner who employs shepherds. The list of the things he will make for his lady: "beds of roses" "thousand fragrant posies," "cap of flowers," "kirtle embroidered with leaves of myrtle," "gown made of the finest wool/Which from our pretty lambs we pull," "fair-lined slippers," "buckles of the purest gold," "belt of straw and ivy buds," "coral clasps," and "amber studs") reveal a great deal about the situation of the "Shepherd" and what he can offer his love. While certainly many of the adornments Marlowe lists would be within the power of a real shepherd to procure or make (the slippers, the belt, possibly the bed of roses (in season), the cap of flowers, and the many posies, and possibly even the kirtle embroidered with myrtle and the lambs wool gown,) but the gold buckles, the coral clasps,

and the amber studs would not be easily available to the smallholder or tenant shepherds who actually did the work of shepherding. This increasingly fanciful list of gifts could only come from a member of the gentry, or a merchant in a town.

This is another convention of pastoral poetry. While the delights of the countryside and the rural life of manual labor are celebrated, the poet (and the reader) is assumed to be noble, or at least above manual labor. The fantasy of bucolic paradise is entirely idealized; Marlowe's Shepherd is not a real person, but merely a poetic device to celebrate an old poetic ideal in verse. Incidentally, the plants mentioned (roses, flowers, and myrtle) are conventional horticultural expressions of romance. The rose, especially, was sacred to the goddess Venus (and it is how roses have come to symbolize romantic love in some modern Western cultures.) The myrtle was associated with Venus, too, and especially with marriage rituals in Ancient Rome. This connotation would have been known to Marlowe's readers. The attribute of virginity should not necessarily be assumed here; it was not for a few more centuries that myrtle would come to symbolize sexual purity. Therefore the kirtle embroidered with myrtle is not just a pretty rhyme and a word-picture of a desirable garment. It was meant to symbolize that this was a nuptial invitation, and that the Shepherd's lady was not strictly defined (though she may well have been

meant to be) a virgin bride. Myrtle was an appropriate nature symbol from the Greek and Roman mythologies (from which the first pastoral poems come) to insert into a love-poem.

The image of the Shepherd as a member of the gentry becomes complete when, in the last stanza, it is said "The shepherd swains shall dance and sing/For thy delight each May-morning." The picture here is of other shepherds doing the speaker's bidding. A rustic form of performance – in the open air and not on a stage – is again in marked contrast to the kind of formal performance of plays on the Renaissance stage, which would make Marlowe famous at a very young age. The poem ends with an "if" statement, and contains a slightly somber note. There is no guarantee that the lady will find these country enticements enough to follow the Shepherd, and since the construction of them is preposterous and fantastical to begin with, the reader is left with the very real possibility that the Shepherd will be disappointed.

Analysis

“The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” was composed sometime in Marlowe’s early years, (between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three) around the same time he translated Ovid’s *Amores*. This is to say, Marlowe wrote this poem before he went to London to become a playwright. Thornton suggests that Marlowe’s poetic and

dramatic career follows an “Ovidian career model” (xiv), with his amatory poems belonging to his youth, followed later by epic poems (such as *Hero and Leander*) and *Lucan’s First Book*). The energy and fanciful nature of youth is evident in “Passionate Shepherd”, which has been called “an extended invitation to rustic retirement” (xv). It is headlong in its rush of sentiment, though, upon examination, it reveals itself to be a particularly well-balanced piece of poetry. This poem is justly famous: though it may not be immediately identifiable as Marlowe's (it is often mistakenly thought to be a sonnet of Shakespeare, though that is incorrect in both authorship and poetic form) it has a place in most anthologies of love-poetry. It may well be the most widely recognized piece that Marlowe ever wrote, despite the popularity of certain of his plays.

The meter, though seemingly regular, gives a great deal of meaning and music to this poem. In line 10 the iambic pattern, so far unbroken, reverses to trochaic (stressed, unstressed). The line is innocuous "And a thousand fragrant posies" – there is no special meaning in this line that requires a complete reversal of the meter. But it is a completely complementary line to the one above it (which contains an almost perfect match of nine iambic syllables), and creates movement and motion in the poem. This kind of temporary shift of meter makes the poem lighter to read, and,

while preserving regularity, lessens any sing-song quality that might occur if too many regular lines appear in sequence. This skillful change is one of the reasons this poem is so often read aloud. It is musical and regular to the ear, but it is never rigid or predictable.

Line endings, too, can create variety within regularity, and also call attention to the subject matter of the lines. The only stanza which contains the line ending termed "feminine" (that is, an additional unstressed syllable following the final stressed syllable – while it may not have been called "feminine" in Marlowe's day, the softer consonant at the end of a disyllabic word such as those in this stanza definitely can convey femininity) is the third. "There **will I make theebeds of roses**" This is done by using disyllabic words at the end of the line. The second syllable of most two-syllable words is usually an unstressed one. These lines all end with particularly feminine objects, too – roses, posies, kirtle (a woman's garment), and myrtle. It should be noted that every other line-terminating word in the entire poem is a monosyllabic one, with the lone exception of line 22, in which the "masculine" stressed ending is forced by the hyphenated construction "**May-morn ing**". Marlowe chose his words with very great care.

Scansion of poetry is never exact; while lines 1 and 20 are often read as iambic, the beginning (especially line 20) can easily be

read as a spondee (two long syllables – **Come live** with me **and be** my love/ rather than Come **live** with **me** and **be** my love/). A skillful and expressive reader might read this repeated line thusly, upon its second occurrence. The different stress would add pleading to the tone of the line (the emphases on the verbs "come live" and "and be") and bespeak a slight desperation on the part of the Shepherd. If read the opposite way from the first line (spondaic rather than iambic) the meaning of the line changes just enough to create a development of emotion. This is no mean feat in a poem only twenty-four lines in length. (Note that there is disputed stanza (second from the last) "Thy silver dishes for thy meat" which appears in some older editions – the latest critical editions do not include it.)

At first glance "The Passionate Shepherd To His Love" can seem to be a nice piece of pastoral frippery. Considering that it was written, probably, in Marlowe's late adolescence, and if read as a superficial exercise in the practice of a very old form of poetry, it can seem to be light and insubstantial. But any studied analysis of the poem reveals its depth; the poem can be read as containing irony (as written by an urbane man who longed for the city rather than the country, and thus constructed impossible rustic scenarios), serious and heartfelt emotion, a slight political commentary, a gentle sadness, and a transcendent love of nature. Good poetry is

often many things to different readers, and Marlowe was able to create, within a codified (and one might say ossified) form of poetry a piece of clever and flexible Elizabethan verse. The Shepherd may not have been real, but the emotions and effects created by this poem have their own reality